

# COPING WITH SUCCESS: DISTANCE LEARNING IN INDIANA HIGHER EDUCATION

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sage once cautioned, “Be careful what you wish for lest you get it.” Accomplishing significant enrollments in distance learning now confronts Indiana’s higher education institutions with new challenges in handling that success.

Though popular media still speak of distance learning as new or experimental, Indiana’s higher education community has been practicing it for nearly a century. Indiana University’s independent study program dates to the early 1900’s, and Purdue began broadcasting college classes by radio in the thirties. Purdue and IU began inter-campus course delivery in 1961 that led to creation of the Indiana Higher Education Telecommunication System (IHETS) in 1967. Thus, Indiana’s institutions and their faculties have a history of creativity in using technology to support, improve, and deliver postsecondary education, even though we also have a deep-seated tradition of doing rather than bragging. We take for granted what others, several years later, loudly proclaim as “innovative” or “unprecedented.”

The upside of such self-effacing competence is that Hoosiers have an extensive range of learning opportunities now available from Indiana institutions; the downside is that too few know about those opportunities. On the other hand, even with the limited promotion we have been able to mount, the number of enrollments in distance programs is beginning to exceed capacity based on current administrative structures and instructional assumptions. Securing more state funding is unlikely in the near future. Indiana continues, however, to have dismal educational attainment levels that demand improvement in order for the state to remain economically competitive and continue the quality of life we value. Campus-based classes alone will not meet the need.

## IT’S ABOUT TIME, NOT GEOGRAPHY

Before I proceed, let me clarify terms. The standard definition of distance learning is *education that is mediated to facilitate learning when instructor and students are separated by geographic distance or time*

*or both*, and this article assumes that broad meaning. Other terms that often confuse discussion include *distributed learning*, *virtual learning*, *online learning*, and *e-learning*. Further complication ensues from conflicting application of those terms. For example, the K12 community tends to restrict *distance learning* to two-way video delivery only and *online learning* to Web-based learning, while the corporate training sector often uses *online learning* and *e-learning* to mean stand-alone computer-based learning but sometimes uses those terms to encompass two-way video conferencing as well.

One reason for the proliferation of terms is that, for higher education at least, the Web has made “distance” learning a misnomer. Even before the advent of the Web, fewer than half of distance learners in state or national studies indicated that geographic distance from a campus was the major reason for their use of technology to access education. Skyrocketing enrollments in online learning have helped educators see that the time/schedule constraints of working adults are the primary limiting factor—indeed, the perceived geographic barriers often come down to the time it takes students to drive those distances.

When some institutions such as SUNY and the University of Illinois launched their online classes, the influx of enrollments came largely from on-campus resident students. Those students, too, needed more convenient class schedules to accommodate their own work schedules or pick up an additional class to make more timely progress toward degree completion. Because of Indiana’s long-standing use of technology for educational outreach, we have not seen as large an impact. To further substantiate the extent to which schedule constraints are the major limitation for adult learners, however, Ivy Tech State College enrollments (which now constitute more than half of the total statewide tally) are primarily from students within the region rather than across the state or around the world. Consequently, higher-education practitioners are more likely to use the term *distributed learning* and sometimes extend that term to include classes that meet regularly in person but include extensive Web-based support.

Yet another indicator that distance is not the primary issue also represents a cause for concern. Indiana campuses offer several online courses and degree programs that they no longer list through the Indiana College Network (ICN). The programs are still offered, but the campuses were unable to satisfy the demand from around the state because local enrollments filled the classes as soon as they were announced, leading to genuine frustration on the part of more distant students who wanted to take those classes. Unfortunately, most of those programs are in high-demand IT subjects sorely needed elsewhere in the state. A major topic for consultation in the coming year will address how to scale to meet widespread needs without sacrificing educational quality, particularly as the State's fiscal uncertainties force retrenchment.

## QUANTITY AND QUALITY

For breadth, depth, and choice, few states equal what's available from Indiana's accredited colleges and universities (with the usual notable exceptions of the huge California and Florida educational systems and populations). Our institutions take advantage of print/mail, audioconference, CD-ROM, videotape, cable and public TV, satellite, Internet/Web, and multi-way video conference to connect learners with formal learning experiences.

Collectively, the institutions offer over 70 associate, baccalaureate, and master's degree and 35 certificate programs encompassing nearly 2,000 credit courses in disciplines from arts and humanities to business to science to education to health professions (and yes, library and information science as well). Not surprisingly, the strong movement in the past five years has been toward Web-based classes and degrees, though most other major delivery systems also use the Web to provide resources and facilitate out-of-class interaction. In fact, the "blended learning solutions" now being embraced in the corporate sector have been common practice in higher education for a decade. The businesses and K12 schools that unsuccessfully tried stand-alone computer-based educational materials are discovering the merits of "instructor-led" learning, which is what higher education classes have been about from the outset.

As all the institutions are fully accredited by regional and specialized accrediting bodies, their distance-delivered classes and programs must meet the same standards. Slapping a set of textual lecture notes on the Web and turning students loose was never typical in Indiana and is now rare elsewhere. Indeed, preparation of a good video or online course helps faculty learn how to teach more effectively, and the improvements spill over into their traditional classroom instruction as well.

## INDIANA'S VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

Like our neighboring states, Indiana has a virtual university consortium. It's called the Indiana College Network, and it was the first such interinstitutional virtual university in the country. (Thomas Edison in New Jersey and Excelsior in New York pre-date ICN but are single, degree-granting institutions.) Now it's routine to hear educators from other states talk about their home institution models and refer with justifiable pride to their virtual university web sites that list 50 or more degree and certificate programs. Back in 1994 when ICN was launched, there were no models—Indiana in several cases provided a model for others.

ICN continues to be one of the largest and most comprehensive, in part because ICN is more than just a web site. In 1992 IHETS' Board of Directors created the Indiana Partnership for Statewide Education as a "consortium within the consortium" to focus interinstitutional collaboration on assuring that a full range of educational opportunities is available to Hoosiers via multiple technologies wherever they live and work. Thus, our Indiana institutions—including two- and four-year, public and private colleges and universities—created ICN from the grass roots and, as they did with IHETS in the mid-1960's, invented something new.

The Partnership has devoted early and continuing attention to questions of quality, transferability, faculty development, library services, and student services. Putting learners' needs foremost has been a core philosophy for the Partnership from the outset, placing student rather than institutional convenience as the driver of cross-institutional registration processes that protect financial-aid eligibility. Student needs for variety complemented the institutions' needs to save money by not having to offer every course themselves, driving creation of a Home Institution model that enables students from one institution to register for courses from other institutions without having to deal with multiple enrollment applications and after-the-fact transfer procedures. (Last year ICN processed 3,300 such cross-institutional registrations, with a few students enrolling with as many as five different campuses in a single semester.)

Expectations about facilitated transfer have in turn required patient building of confidence and trust among the faculties of sister institutions to deliver education of solid quality through early interinstitutional peer review committees as well as later creation of a set of shared Guiding Principles for Faculty in Distance Learning. An active library services committee provided early recommendations both for librarian involvement in course development teams and for local library support for students in their home towns. The Partnership invested early in helping each institution build its faculty development capabilities: publishing a

faculty handbook and two collections of papers by experienced faculty members, providing regular conferences for faculty and instructional support staff to exchange best practices, and most recently launching an IPSE Awards program recognizing creativity by Indiana faculty and instructional support staff. (One of the first award winners was Dr. Howard Rosenbaum of the IU School of Library and Information Science in Bloomington.)

Being student-centered has also required concurrent attention to high tech and high touch. The technology focus has taken the form of creating the first statewide online database of courses, promoting use of varied technologies to improve access and accommodate different learning styles, enabling online pre-registration for initial or multi-institutional enrollments, and increasing the functionality of the ICN web site so that learners can find what they need without unnecessary recourse to phone calls. The high-touch components include both an 800-number hotline for assistance, designated ICN coordinators at home and originating campuses who are familiar not only with their institutions' offerings but also the complexities confronting distant students, and a network of 70 learning centers in communities around the state, for which the personal attention of a local coordinator is even more important than the particular technology access that may be available there.

## LEARNER RESPONSE

Learner response to this array of opportunities has been both gratifying and daunting. Even with limited promotion, course enrollments at Indiana's public colleges and universities have tripled in the last five years, due almost entirely to the dramatic growth in Internet courses. In 1994-95 the Internet accounted for one percent of distance enrollments; three years later the proportion was half, and in 2000-01 the percentage was nearly three-quarters. For 2000-01, the course-enrollment tally via all media was at 34,200; as data for 2001-02 come in, it appears clear that Indiana will pass the 40,000 mark. Based on what we know about enrollment patterns, that represents some 20,000 people whose postsecondary education is being enhanced—in some cases made entirely possible—by distance learning. Though these numbers do not include those studying by traditional print independent study, it is interesting to note that the Internet tide is also lifting the correspondence boat, and enrollments by that means are also rising significantly.

Our own student surveys mirror the results of national student satisfaction surveys. While a few learners try but find they just don't like the experience (on the order of 5% to 10%), the vast majority (85% to 90%) does like distance learning, would take another class, and would recommend it to a friend even though

a large minority misses the face-to-face interaction with the instructor and other students. Most of our Indiana enrollments are "adult non-traditional learners" with complicated work and family schedules, so it isn't surprising that they most highly appreciate the flexibility of distance learning. Also not surprising is that, since credit courses represent the preponderance of offerings, nearly all of our students are pursuing a credential, typically a degree.

A common worry about distance learning is "high drop-out rates," but our own anecdotally reported experience is that course completion is comparable to that for campus-based courses—in the 80% to 90% range—for adults. The supposedly high drop out rates usually turn out to be either for those print correspondence classes where feedback and encouragement to persist are limited and slow in arriving or, in the corporate sector particularly, for ad hoc online training materials where there is no impetus for completion and no expectation of accountability to a supervisor or trainer. Given the significant growth in distance learning, however, it behooves serious distance learning providers to investigate more rigorously both course-completion and degree-persistence rates, and we hope to begin such studies yet this year.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

The Partnership has several task groups currently focused on updating library-service recommendations, addressing new ADA issues and opportunities with adaptive technology, increasing participation by more institutions in the ICN structures, and developing common online admissions applications. The institutions continue to add new programs each year to meet pressing state educational needs. Individually and collectively through the Partnership, the institutions are paying particular attention to improving high-school-to-college transitions as well as to better understanding business' education and training needs. The Partnership and its members will strengthen outreach to communities organizing to meet locally identified educational needs. And, as noted earlier, we expect to devote attention to persistence rates and scalability concerns.

For the longer term, two exciting projects are under development. Jointly with the Central Indiana Public Broadcasting Consortium, IHETS is preparing to launch a pilot Lifelong Learning Service that will take advantage of new digital broadcasting capabilities to create a to-the-home, round-the-clock interactive service to meet Hoosier learning needs in innovative ways. An even broader group of partners from K12 education, libraries, public broadcasting, state agencies, higher education, cultural organizations, and others is collaboratively developing an Indiana Learning Portal to provide customizable access to comprehensive information about the virtual universe of learning opportunities

from all potential Indiana providers.

Distance learning will have an increasingly important role to play in addressing Indiana's substantial educational needs. There is every reason to believe that, with such strong foundations of success, higher education will expand its partnerships with other educators to become increasingly creative in the face of continued gloomy fiscal forecasts. Indiana's colleges and universities have proven their capability and willingness to meet such challenges.